The Maxims of Pocket

1. The Abyss of Pocket I didn’t go down there to be brave. I went because the floor gave out and the sky didn’t catch me. The abyss swallowed the shouting first—mine and theirs—and left me with the pulse. Down there I learned the only lesson worth the bruise: if something wants to eat you whole, let it. Let it, and see what grows from inside the thing that thought you were dinner. I called that place the Refugium—not safe, just real. I drank the dark until it tasted like water. When I stood, my bones knew a law no judge could sign.

2. The Mark I spit on a stone and drew a circle not closed, mouth open at the bottom like a fish gasping. That was the mark. Folks asked what it meant. I told ’em, “It’s an opening that looks like a wound because sometimes wounds are doors.” The Refugium ain’t a retreat. It’s a pantry built behind night. You get there by falling honest. Every time I carved it—on dirt, bark, courthouse steps—I was writing directions: go down and eat.

3. First Rule: Not to Blame Blame builds nothing. It’s a stone you throw at your own roof. I learned this watching people hold their hurt up like proof, then trade it like currency. Felt good for five minutes. Burned the tongue for five years. “Not to blame,” I said, and it wasn’t mercy—it was engineering. I needed both hands free to lift what was broken. I needed my eyes on the hinge, not the villain. You want heat or you want light? I’ve been cold enough to know the difference.

4. The Village of Stones A town stacked with walls made of names. Every brick carried a face someone swore ruined them. Streets narrowed to alleys, alleys to shut-ins, shut-ins to graves you could walk through by mistake. They asked me which stone I’d add. I put a blank one down. They laughed. “You forgot a name.” I said, “No, I forgot the chain.” Wind moved through that gap like a throat finally clearing. A widow put down one stone. Then a brother. Then a judge. The wall didn’t fall; it opened.

5. Second Rule: Not to Shame Shame’s a mirror they smear before they hand it to you. I used to polish it with my skin. Cut myself on it, too. “Not to shame,” I said, and the ghost hissed back, Coward. Maybe. But I ain’t kneeling to a mouth that feeds on quiet. Holiness ain’t hiding. Holiness is standing in your own name and not apologizing for the height.

6. The River Children Kids with ash faces. Elders said the ash kept them pure. I waded in and washed my face till the water went black and the sun remembered my cheekbones. “Come on,” I told the little ones, “let’s see who you are under there.” They came like birds to a hose on July asphalt. Laughter hit the bank like glass breaking. The elders clucked. I shrugged. If purity is a mask, it’s just another form of dirt.

7. Third Rule: Not to Game I’ve seen games played with lives. Papers shuffled like cards, dice loaded with zip codes, winners decided in rooms where losers can’t fit. “Not to game,” I said, and folks thought I meant don’t play. I mean don’t turn people into pieces. I mean trust is not a token. The moment you barter it, you ain’t dealing in life anymore—you’re trading in ghosts.

8. The Hall of Golden Dice They invited me to roll. Gold clicked on marble like teeth. Stakes: food for the week, time with your kid, the word innocent if you could afford the vowel. I took the dice and crushed them. Turns out gold becomes dust if a man’s hand remembers he’s a man. They howled. I coughed. “If fairness needs luck, it ain’t fairness,” I said. They called the guards. People called me brother on the way out. That was enough.

9. The Second Maxim: Home in a Thought The beauty of being native is that I can go home in a thought. Exile tried to evict me from my own chest; I sublet to joy. All I have to do is remember the smell of a kitchen where the light is a little rude and the bread is loud. I can stand in the middle of a storm and set a table in my mind. Pull up a chair. We’re not lost; we’re portable.

10. The Hall of Witnesses They put me on a stand under a ceiling that looked like a lid. “Who gave you these laws?” they asked. “The fall,” I said. “The climb,” I added. “The landing,” I finished. Then the witnesses came: a man with empty hands that didn’t shake anymore; a girl with river cheeks; a woman who refused to trade trust again. They didn’t defend me. They testified to themselves. The court went quiet the way a room goes quiet when a baby finally sleeps.

11. Pocket’s Maxim of Law Prudentia est verba nosse, intelligentia est significationem videre, intellegere intellectuale, Deus est ignoscere. Wisdom is to know the words. Understanding is to see the meaning. Intellect is to comprehend. God is to forgive. I scratched it in dust with a dull nail. Folks love gavels. I prefer syllables. Know the words or you fight a shadow. See the meaning or you swing at air. Grasp it or you’ll drop your own key. And then the worst, the best: forgive. Not so they get off easy—so you stop hauling them uphill in your ribs. Forgiveness ain’t a pardon; it’s a locksmith.

12. The Desert of Silence My throat went dry and took my voice with it. Silence tried to convince me it was truth. Shame put on memory like a second shirt. Blame brought souvenirs. “Play a little,” Game said, jangling old victories. I sat cross-legged on heat, reached for home like a match in a glovebox. Thought of a kitchen. Heard the rude light. The bread yelled hello. I drank that thought till it was water.

13. Return from Silence I didn’t strut out. I leaked out slow, like a tire that knows the road is long anyway. People think survival is fireworks. It’s duct tape and stubborn. I had sand in my teeth and a prayer I couldn’t pronounce right. Still counted. I wrote the mark in the dust with a toe and kept walking. Sometimes faith is just forward.

14. The Children’s Circle They sat in a ring holding small flames like questions. “Will there be more laws?” one asked. “Only the ones you grow,” I said. “I planted seeds. You decide which ones feed.” They pressed their flames into the dirt. A tree came up acting like it had been there the whole time. Leaves rustled: not to blame, not to shame, not to game, always return. The kids listened. So did the grown-ups pretending not to.

15. The Last Maxim (Unspoken) They wanted a final line. A last nail. I let my voice rest in my pocket and gave them quiet, which is not the same as nothing. “The last maxim is yours,” I finally rasped. “If I write it, it’s mine. If you write it, it’s law.” I drew the Refugium one more time and left the circle open. Doors should look like wounds. Wounds should look like doors. I stepped through and down, back to the pantry behind night. If you come, bring hunger. We eat first; we argue later.